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Message from the executive director: legislative update

by *Bryan Collier*

With the 85th Texas Legislature convening on January 10, 2017, and the pre-filing of legislation scheduled to begin on November 14, 2016, I will provide you with periodic legislative updates during the coming months.

As 2016 draws to a close, legislators are busy finishing the interim studies that will help shape the agenda for the upcoming legislative session, and they will soon begin filing legislation to be considered by the 85th Legislature. Typically, relatively few bills are filed in November and December compared to the thousands that will be proposed before the March 10 filing deadline.

As you may know, state policymakers asked agencies to submit an initial budget proposal for the Fiscal Years 2018-19 biennium which showed the impact of a 4 percent budget reduction. The TDCJ Legislative Appropriations Request (LAR) for the Fiscal Years

2018-19 biennium was prepared pursuant to those instructions. Consistent with the instruction state agencies received, TDCJ also requested additional funding through the submission of “exceptional items,” with the first exception a request to avoid most of the 4 percent funding reduction.

On Monday, September 12, the agency’s LAR was discussed in a budget hearing conducted by staff of the Legislative Budget Board and the Governor’s Office of Budget and Planning. Staff from the Lieutenant Governor’s office, the Speaker’s office, the Senate Finance Committee and the House Appropriations Committee, as well as staff from other legislative offices, also participated in the hearing. During the meeting I provided a brief overview of the agency as well as a more extensive review of our Legislative Appropriations Request. In regards to the latter, most of my remarks and the brief discussion which followed focused on retaining the funding necessary to maintain current operations.

The hearing was just one step in a budget process that will not be completed until May 2017. The next milestone will involve both the House of Representatives and the Senate filing their versions of the general appropriations bill. Although pre-filing of legislation begins on November 14, we don’t anticipate seeing the initial budget proposals until January at the earliest. The budgets proposed by House and Senate will serve as starting points for legislative deliberations throughout the spring; the two versions may differ in a number of ways, to include the amounts earmarked for TDCJ. Once the bills are filed, we will prepare summaries for placement on the agency website.

Elsewhere in this issue of *Connections* is a summary of the LAR submitted by the Employees Retirement System (ERS). The ERS credits actions taken by the 84th Legislature for substantial improvements in the fiscal soundness of the retirement system, and seeks some additional funding to help

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continue that progress. ERS also requests additional funding for the purpose of maintaining current health care benefits provided through the Group Benefits Plan. TDCJ supports the ERS funding request.

In the next issue of *Connections* I will provide another legislative update, to include any new developments during the past two months as well as my perspective on several TDCJ-related issues that may be considered during the upcoming session. ●